

Louie's Last Story

Chapter 1 Party Time

“What did the dyslexic Frenchman say when he saw a beautiful woman?” This question was asked by a woman named Alice Rader, who was herself a beauty, with long auburn hair flowing in waves around a smiling pixie face.

After a moment of silence, Alice gave us the answer, “La, la, ooh!” A dozen people surrounding her groaned in response.

Alice grinned and said, “Okay, try this one: why don't Amish people water ski?” More silence. Then Alice said, “Because the horses would drown.” More groans.

“You're not going to use that one, are you?” asked our host, Louie Stein. The dozen people in Alice's audience were crammed like bananas in a bunch in the dining area of Louie's small motorhome, where he was hosting an after party at the National Storytelling Festival.

We were invited to the party because we'd become friends with Louie, a nationally-known storyteller, in our home state of Minnesota. By we, I mean my best friend, Alan Jeffrey, and his wife, Carol; and me (Warren Mitchell, better known as Mitch), and my wife, Martha Todd, who had kept her maiden name when she married me. The four of us were on vacation, attending the annual three-day storytelling festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee, for the first time.

Eighty-two-year old Louie Stein had lured us to the national festival after we'd heard him perform at a couple of programs in St. Paul, where Al and I work as a photographer and a reporter, respectively, for the *St. Paul Daily Dispatch*. Louie had raved about the festival in Jonesborough when I interviewed him for a feature story about his life as a Jewish refugee from the Nazi holocaust who became a dedicated school teacher and a master storyteller.

Louie made the national festival sound like so much fun that we simply had to make the trip to Jonesborough. Now it was Saturday night, and Louie had invited us to join a crowd of storytellers and friends in his motorhome after the evening's final event. We were feeling privileged, and slightly intimidated, to be included in this group of brilliant, witty and amazingly articulate people.

Alice was speaking again. “I'm trying out jokes to use as warmups when I'm the emcee tomorrow afternoon. How about this one: why was Jesus born in a manger?”

When nobody responded, she said, “Because King Herod repealed Mary's health insurance.”

“Oh, god, you can't use that one,” Louie said. “You're sure to offend somebody's religion and somebody else's politics with that one. You'll get booed off the stage.” Several other voices were raised in agreement.

“Okay, how about this one: what do you call a prostitute who is going from Tennessee to California?”

Another silence. “Westward ho,” said Alice. More groans from the group, followed by shouts of “that’s enough, Alice.”

Seconds before Alice began her volley of warmup jokes, Louie had introduced Al and me to Willy Stone, another Minnesota storyteller who was appearing at the national festival. Willy was living in St. Paul, but he’d grown up in Louie’s hometown of New Ulm, a small southeastern Minnesota city founded by German immigrants in the 1850s. Louie had described Willy as one of his star pupils at New Ulm High School.

Willy appeared to be about twenty-five years younger than Louie, which would put him in his middle-to-late fifties. He was about my height, six-foot-one, but much slimmer than I am, with a long, narrow face, a prominent nose and chin, and close-cut dark brown hair. Willy was, in fact, the exact physical opposite of Louie, who stood about five-ten and had a thick body with a prominent belly, an oval face and a crescent of white hair around a shiny bald dome.

A small silver earring gleamed in Willy’s right earlobe. I tried to remember if the right ear signified straight or gay, but couldn’t. I’d have to ask Franklin P. Butterfield III, the *Daily Dispatch* religion reporter, who was happily and flamboyantly gay.

We had heard Willy Stone perform twice during the festival and enjoyed his stories both times. “Louie tells me that you’re both first-timers at the national,” he said.

“We are,” I said. “Louie lured us here with glowing stories about glowing storytellers.”

“I hope we’re living up to Louie’s glowing hype.”

“You are. We’ve heard nothing but first-class stories told by first-class storytellers, including you.”

“Thank you,” Willy said. “Did Louie tell you that he was the one who inspired me to try storytelling? He was my storytelling mentor. Got me interested while I was in his class in high school and I’ve been following in his footsteps ever since.”

“Good footsteps to follow,” I said. “So you grew up in New Ulm?”

“Oh, yah. Born and raised there. Lucky enough to have Louie for a teacher.”

A short, round, fortyish woman with clouds of curly black hair pushed her way into a spot beside Willy. She carried an empty wine glass in her right hand. “You the folks from Minnesota?” she asked.

“That’s us,” Al said. “I’m Al and he’s Mitch.”

“To tell the truth, I’m from Duluth,” she said. “Thumbelina is my name and telling stories is my game.”

“I don’t remember seeing you on the program,” I said.

“On the daily program I am not. Late night ghost stories is my lot, and a workshop I have taught.”

“Do you tell all your stories in rhyme?”

“I don’t use rhyme all the time,” she said. “But a scary rhyme can be sublime.”

“Were your rhyming ghost stories really scary?” Al said.

“Scary as a rattlesnake popping from your birthday cake,” she said.

“I’d rather have a pretty girl pop out of my cake, thank you,” Al said.

“There is nothing like a dame,” I said.

“Nothing in the world,” said Thumbelina. “Nice meeting you folks. See you later; I’m heading for another glass of Louie’s red wine.”

“I’m glad she’s able to say something in prose,” Al said.

“Her rhymes do keep you on your toes,” I said.

Alice Rader’s voice rose above the general murmur of conversation. “I’ve got another one for you: what do you get when you cross a fly with an elephant?”

The room went silent.

“A zipper that never forgets,” said Alice. The groans were long and loud.

“I think I need more wine after that,” Willy said. As he wormed his way through the crowd to the source of the fermented grape, we were rejoined by Carol and Martha, who had drifted away in the crowd.

“Where’ve you been?” Al asked.

“Talking to Louie and his son,” Carol said. “They’ve been filling us in about the festival. It’s actually been going on here since 1973. Would you believe that more than four-hundred volunteers are involved in planning and working for this festival?”

“Sounds like the whole town turns out,” I said.

“The five tents they have set up will hold from a thousand people in the smallest to sixteen-hundred in each of the two biggest, and they draw an average attendance of ten thousand people a year,” Martha said. “Louie says that’s almost double the actual population of Jonesborough, which isn’t quite six thousand. No wonder we couldn’t find a motel closer to the action.” We were staying in a motel in the neighboring, larger community of Johnson City, a fifteen-minute drive from the festival headquarters. We considered ourselves lucky to get accommodations that close. When we’d called the motel for reservations more than a month before the festival weekend, we’d asked for adjoining rooms. The desk clerk had laughed and said he couldn’t even put us on the same floor. It was only because of a couple of cancellations that he had any space at all.

“I think it’s time to head back to that motel,” Carol said. “I’m going to turn into a pumpkin very soon.”

We squirmed through the merrymakers to say goodnight to Louie. “Glad you could join us,” Louie said. “Be sure to come to the one o’clock event in the Courthouse Tent tomorrow afternoon. I’m going to tell a very special story at the second half of the hour. You might even want to write about this one, Mitch.”

“What’s it about?” I asked.

“You’ll find out tomorrow. Remember, the Courthouse Tent. One o’clock.” There were stages in five large tents scattered through downtown Jonesborough. The Courthouse Tent, which was behind the town’s quaint eighteenth-century courthouse, between Main Street and a set of very active railroad tracks, was one of the two biggest.

“We’ll be sure to be there,” I said.

Alice Rader was standing beside the door as we were going out. Al stopped in front of her and said, “I’ve got one more for you.”

Alice laughed and said, “What is it?”

“Where does a one-armed man go shopping?”

She thought for a moment before she said, “I give up. Where?”

“At a second-hand store.” On that line, all four of us quickly exited down-right.